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APIAN ALLUSION IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* (1891)

Bees and honey hold an important place in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Before I note an allusion to some Virgilian bees in the opening lines, here are some observations on bees and honey, in Wilde and in Tennyson, that help to contextualize their presence in Wilde's novel. In Chapter 10, Dorian at last takes up the strange yellow book given to him by Sir Henry Wotton:

His eye fell on the yellow book that Lord Henry had sent him. What was it, he wondered. He went towards the little pearl-coloured octagonal stand, that had always looked to him like the work of some strange Egyptian bees that had wrought in silver, and taking up the volume, flung himself in an armchair, and began to turn over the leaves. After a few minutes he became absorbed. It was the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him.

(Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 274)

This poisonous book (Dorian later tells Sir Henry that it has poisoned him), yellow like honey, is taken up by Dorian from an octagonal stand that makes him think of the hexagon of a honeycomb.ⁱ The stand, of course, is octagonal not hexagonal—but then everything in Dorian's world by this point is becoming too much. In that poisonous, honey-coloured book he becomes absorbed.

In Alfred Tennyson's poems, bees and honey have a range of associations, positive and negative. They are linked to classical learning, artistic making, and eloquence, but also to human isolation, to republicanism, and to sexual violence.ⁱⁱ In 'To the Queen' (1873), blessing

the moderation and conservatism of Britain, Tennyson had condemned the recent introduction to England of ‘Art with poisonous honey stolen from France’ (l. 56)—art influenced by a French aesthetic in which not only sexual dissidence but violence played a direct part. If the bee-poet (an ancient figure in literary representation) were to take nectar, or inspiration, from the flowers of evil (from Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), not least) then the resulting honey-poetry was likely to be poisonous. And that poison was a sign not only of decadent aesthetics but also specifically of homosexuality, with which the bee had become linked both in the context of French decadence and through its post-Darwinian association, as fertilizing agent, with the hermaphroditic quality of flowers.ⁱⁱⁱ Honey-literature could be a sweet or a poisonous product, and the bee-artists that produce it ideal makers or dangerous transgressors.

At the start of *Dorian Gray*, where the presence of bees is established, there is another kind of apian literary connection; one that echoes an epic bee simile which (as I shall explain below) had by this point in literary history itself made a remarkable journey in representation, from the underworld to heaven, and from heaven to hell. This is how the novel begins:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid jade-faced painters

of Tokio who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion. The sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence round the dusty gilt horns of the straggling woodbine, seemed to make the stillness more oppressive. The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ. (169)

There is an apian allusion to Virgil in this passage—an allusion which may be a way for Wilde to invoke a succession of poets up to the nineteenth century, each of whom incorporated a bee simile into his work in order to indicate his place in a literary tradition.

In Book VI of *The Aeneid*, Aeneas visits the underworld and speaks to his father, Anchises. Anchises shows Aeneas the spirits who will one day be reborn into the land of the living and become Aeneas' descendants; and Virgil describes the scene using the following simile:

Aeneas sees a sequestered grove and rustling forest thickets, and the river of Lethe drifting past those peaceful homes. About it hovered peoples and tribes unnumbered; even as when, in the meadows, in cloudless summertime, bees light on many-hued blossoms and stream round lustrous lilies and all the fields murmur with the humming.

This is the Latin:

Interea videt Aeneas in valle reducta
seclusum nemus et virgulta sonantia silvae
Lethaeumque, domos placidas qui praenatat, amnem.

hunc circum innumerae gentes populiue volabant;
ac velut in pratis ubi apes aestate serena
floribus insidunt variis et candida circum
lilia funduntur, strepit omnis murmure campus. (VI, 703-709)

Tennyson had heard the mimetic potential of these lines—‘innumerae gentes... murmure campus’—and adapted it for the last line of his lyric ‘Come down, O maid’ in *The Princess*: ‘And murmuring of innumerable bees’ (Tennyson, vol. 2).^{iv} Virgil’s Latin is often mimetic, and that was part of Tennyson’s inheritance, both in the particular case of ‘Come down, O maid’ and also in general. But, in echoing the bee simile from *Aeneid* VI, both Tennyson and Wilde inherited more than pleasing sounds, and more than a relation to Virgil’s simile alone.

For Virgil’s epic bee simile had later been adapted by Dante in the *Paradiso*, where the bees figured the angels at the Empyrean (XXXI, 1-18). And Milton, the anti-Catholic poet, responding both to Virgil and to Dante, had placed his own ‘Innumerable’ bees in hell, where they represented the fallen angels (I, 338, 767-792). By the time they could be heard in Tennyson’s poem, these literary bees were no longer part of an epic simile; but they still helped Tennyson to indicate the complex nature of literary tradition and to make a claim for his place within it.^v For Wilde, who characteristically lightens the tone, the bees may also signal a deliberate placing of himself within a line of aesthetico-apostolic succession.

What are ‘innumerable’ in Wilde’s paragraph are not the murmuring bees (which appear later) but Sir Henry’s cigarettes—though Sir Henry is looking, while he smokes them, at ‘honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms’. And then, soon enough, we do hear the ‘murmur of the bees’: those bees leading us subtly, as part of the joke, back to the cigarettes, since they are ‘circling with... insistence’ around ‘the straggling woodbine’. The woodbine is not only a species of honeysuckle, but also a particularly strong type of cigarette made and

marketed in England since 1885—and so, in 1891, fashionably recent—by Bristol’s Henry Overton and William Henry Wills.^{vi} And then, when the paragraph comes to a close with ‘the bourdon note of a distant organ’, ‘bourdon’ refers primarily to the strong dark note of the organ stop of that name, but is also (as the organ stop itself alludes) a French word for ‘bumblebee’. Wilde, with his extensive literary learning and pronounced belief (as stated in ‘The Decay of Lying’) that all true art copies not nature but other art, challenges us, humorously, in these lines to find (does he? are they there?) the hints of a future Roman culture (through Virgil), perhaps also of something devilish (through Milton’s adaptation), possibly of Tennyson’s poem of attempted seduction, ‘Come down, O maid’, and certainly, by this point in the nineteenth century, of an atmosphere of homoeroticism, which the bee had by now gathered to itself (*The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, 163-192). He also, in so doing, invites us to recognize his place in an ancient literary tradition.

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ⁱ 'Yet you poisoned me with a book once', p. 352; cf. 'It was a poisonous book', p. 274.

ⁱⁱ See Jane Wright, 'Tennyson's Bees', *The Tennyson Research Bulletin*, 10:4 (2015), 321-339.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), pp. 12-13.

^{iv} For further discussion of this lyric in context, see Jane Wright, 'The Princess and the Bee', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 44:3 (2015), 251-273. Hereafter cited as 'Wright'.

^v Wright, 269.

^{vi} The woodbine is an addition to the 1891 edition. The 1890 version had 'hollyhocks'. See Bristow, p. 169.